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AUTHOR Passman, Roger
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ABSTRACT

High stakes testing is a given in many public school districts in the United States. This paper reports the chilling effect high stakes testing had on the pedagogy of one teacher. The study took place in a large Midwestern urban district where a university consultant observed a fifth-grade classroom. This researcher was able to observe and document a teacher who attempted to engage in purposeful change in her teaching style and classroom structure. The instructor decided to teach a unit on the Age of Exploration, a long-term inquiry project about explorers. She divided the class into six groups of five and sat them at individual tables. She started the project by covering her curriculum in a traditional manner, but once she determined what the students knew about explorers, she instructed the students to choose one question, either one of their own or one from another group, and do research and discover the answer. The students were then asked to take a series of weeks to prepare a report, both written and visual, to present to the school community. Over the next several weeks, the students researched at the school library, connected to the Internet, and looked at classroom resources on their topics. The teacher's role became more of a coach in which the shift of responsibility for learning was on the student. As a result, she watched the students enter the world of discovery and inquiry on a topic that genuinely engaged the entire class. The project was a complete success; two of her groups gave very impressive and sophisticated presentations on the topics of "navigation" and "supplies". The teacher noted, "It's amazing how smart kids get when you teach them this way." However soon after the completion of the exploration project, the principal called a faculty meeting. He made a direct order to the school teachers stating, "Don't teach anything that isn't on the Iowa test". He then reminded the teachers about probation, testing success, and job security. After the meeting, the fifth grade teacher felt compelled to return to a traditional classroom setting and abandon her efforts toward a student-centered pedagogy. When faced with the pressure of high-stakes assessment, sadly, the teacher returned to a more teacher-directed classroom where students were once again isolated from one another. She stated, "The constructivist stuff is nice, but we have real work to do now." (Contains 4 figures and 16 references.) (SLD)

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Pressure Cooker: Experiences with Student-Centered Teaching and Learning in High-Stakes Assessment Environments

Roger Passman

Texas Tech University
College of Education
PO Box 41071
Lubbock, TX 79409-1071

(806) 742-1997 ext. 298
Fax: (806) 742-2179
roger.passman@ttu.edu

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Abstract

High-stakes testing is a given in many public school districts in the United States. In this paper, I tell one story of my own lived experience in one urban classroom and the chilling effect that high-stakes testing had on the pedagogy of one teacher. In my role as a university consultant in Esther's fifth-grade room in a large urban district in the Midwest, I was able to observe and document my impressions of Esther as she engaged in purposeful change, moving from a more traditional, transmission model of teaching to a more constructivist, student-centered model of teaching. I was also able to observe and document the effect of an overt instruction from the principal to "teach to the test." After this direct order from her principal, Esther felt compelled to return to "real work" and abandoned her efforts toward a student-centered pedagogy. She did this in spite of her recognition that as she was moving toward a student-centered pedagagy, she noted, "They sure get smart when you teach 'em this way."

Pressure Cooker: Experiences with Student-Centered Teaching and Learning in High-stakes Assessment Environments

Introduction

This is a story of how high-stakes assessment policies in one large urban district impacted on the implementation of student-centered teaching and learning in one fifth-grade classroom. It is a re-telling of my lived experience as I spent time in Esther's[1] fifth-grade room over the period of one academic year. I am telling a story among stories, the tale as I have come to understand it, extracted from a much more complex narrative about teaching in urban schools. In this paper I am arguing that the impact of high-stakes assessment programs, those agendas that arbitrarily set performance cut-points, meting out consequences to students, schools, and teachers who fail to meet these artificially prescribed standards, have a chilling effect on the implementation of student-centered, constructivist practices in the classroom. I am arguing that high-stakes assessment conflicts with the goal of truly educating students. The question is not, it seems to me, one of whether or not we ought to have a form of high stakes assessment, or even what kind of high stakes assessment we ought to consider. The question rather, is one that Paulo Freire (1970) would have us ask, *Who is benefiting from the explosion of high stakes assessment in the United States*?

This study took place in a large Midwestern urban district. In 1985, a wave of statewide school reform driven, in part, by notions of social construction and student-centered approaches established more local control for schools. This reform granted the selection of principals and the spending of school discretionary funds to local school councils made up of parents, community members, teachers, and the principal of the school. Curriculum decisions were also within the general control of the local school council as well. There are some indications that local control may have a significant impact on student achievement. In a study conducted by the Consortium on Chicago School Research standardized test scores were examined over an eight-year time period. The consortium looked at "gain scores," which represent the difference

between entering and exiting scores on achievement tests. From 1988 to 1996, gain scores in reading across grades showed indications of rising trends (Bryk, Thum, Easton, & Luppescu, 1998). The 1985 school reform recognized that time was one of the most precious commodities available to the system. Implementation of reform would take time if real solutions to issues like institutionalized poverty and multiple cultural norms were to be understood and mitigated in the best interest of students.

A short six years later, swept up in the rhetoric of the failure of educational systems (Berliner & Biddle, 1995), a strong political movement toward recentralizing the district to place control of local schools once again in the hands of the central school board was endorsed. This new reform abandoned the gains of the earlier wave of reform. The political effort of the city government was successful, convincing the state assembly to turn control of the schools back to the city and the mayor. A new school board began to attack reforms demanding an immediate fix to what the reform board termed an otherwise intolerable condition. Low test scores were the culprit, in spite of research that indicated otherwise. The mission of the new board was to see that every student read at grade level. I had the sense we suddenly were transported to Lake Woebegone where all the children are above average.

The cry of the new board has been bewildering. On the one hand they claim "research shows" that our vision of the future is the correct approach to fix our schools. On the other, when faced with critical research the claim is made that we are successful in spite of our critics. A return to basics, to explicit direct phonics instruction, to structured lessons scripted by others for teachers to parrot, became the party line, though it was never explicitly required to teach from the back-to-basics approach. No research is ever produced to support their the claims, and board members ignore research that cries foul (Allington & McGill-Franzen, 1992; Allington & Walmsley, 1995; Berliner & Biddle, 1995; McQuillan, 1998). They further ignore work that informs us about multiple voices and multiple literacies (Heath, 1983; Street, 1995). They ignore work that speaks of "best practice" in literacy classrooms (Calkins, 1994; Hyde & Bizar, 1989) and balanced literacy instruction (Cunningham & Allington, 1999).

The district has chosen a path of high-stakes testing and assessment with consequences for students, teachers, and schools for failure to meet arbitrary cut-point standards. Every elementary school student in the district is required to take the Iowa Test of Basic Skills (ITBS) and the Illinois Standards Assessment Test (ISAT). Students in third, sixth, and eighth grades that fail to reach an arbitrary cut-point established by the school board on the ITBS are sent to a summer school program where they are taught from structured (scripted) lessons, retested, and then either passed on or retained in the grade. Schools that fail to achieve arbitrary cut-point performance may be placed on probation and given additional help to raise test scores. Teachers are threatened with termination if their students' test scores do not measure up to pre-set standards. There is a suffocating mood in schools. Teachers are fearful. Principals are fearful. Parents are fearful. Students are fearful. They all should be angry! They should be raging about the glacial effect this policy has on the form and quality of the education being offered.

In this smothering environment, I have been working with several schools to help them create a more constructivist, student-centered model for teaching. The model suggests a continuum from less teacher directed-practice to more student-centered practice. Among the changes we strive to implement are:

- Less whole class instruction including lecturing and teacher led discussions, and More time spent in group and individual inquiry discussions.
- Less seatwork such as worksheets, dittos, workbook exercises and other "make work", and More reliance on student focused inquiry within an integrated curriculum approach.
- Less time spent by students reading text books and basal readers, and More time spent reading authentic literature from trade books.
- Less emphasis on content coverage where large quantities of material is introduced and memorized for later evaluation, and More time spent in learning to understand the content being learned.
- Less time spent in enforced silence, and More time spent in active learning, which may be noisy.

- Less emphasis on ability grouping and pull-out programs that tend to separate students from their peers, and More emphasis on heterogeneous grouping and inclusion programs.
- Less reliance on standardized testing and published assessment programs, and More reliance on portfolio assessment that is developmentally appropriate including teacher assessment.

This list is not meant to be exhaustive, merely suggestive of the role of our work in schools.

Esther's Classroom

I first met Esther at a summer institute intended to introduce teachers to a student-centered approach to teaching and learning. She was asked to attend by her principal with no information about what to expect. The program, called Students at the Center, was funded by the DeWitt Wallace-Readers Digest Fund. This project was initially proposed and funded during the last years of the 1985 reform movement. There was no indication that recentralization was on the immediate horizon.

Esther was literally thrown into this cauldron of constructivist activity without warning. It was something akin culture shock, and Esther complained. She complained about her students, about the parents she had to deal with, about the school, the purpose of the grant; in fact, she complained about everything.

I was assigned to Esther's school, East School, a K-6 building. East School also has a satellite housing seventh and eighth grades located three blocks away from the main building in space rented from the local Catholic parish. I knew I was going to have to work with Esther meeting her resistance head on. It had not occurred to me as I started work in this project that I might meet up with resistance among teachers in the schools. This was, after all, a voluntary project. Schools and teachers were to opt in rather than be forced in to the process. Esther, however, was being forced. She knew it, and so did I. Esther was not quite old guard, but she had been sufficiently influenced by the old guard staff that she was at some risk of what is commonly called teacher burnout.

East School is located in a neighborhood that has never recovered from the loss of an anchor employer. Badger Steel closed its doors some 15 years earlier, devastating a stable working class neighborhood. Poverty in this neighborhood runs high. The community is changing ethnically as well. What once was a stable working-class German, Polish, and Slavic area was now quite diverse as African American and Hispanic families move into and out of the neighborhood as the older, more European population flees. Many of the older teachers in the school talk longingly about how much better it was in the old days when Badger Steel was running at full tilt.

My first day in Esther's classroom was an eye-opener. I was scheduled to observe her class during the second full week of school. She stood at the front of the class literally separated from the students by a table set up between her and her students. Students were seated in rows parallel to the front of the room, desks abutting one another. Esther's desk was set to one side of the rows of student desks in a position that appeared to guard the bookshelves. When I entered the room to observe, I sat at Esther's desk. There were two other adults in the room at the same time, the bilingual teacher and the special-education teacher; it was, it appeared, their inclusion time. (see Figure 1)

Esther stood at the front of the room with a set of cards containing student names. She used the cards to call on children, simply going through the cards one at a time. She kept the cards well shuffled. What a good idea, I thought, a neat way to get to everyone in the class involved during the course of the day. Esther solved the equity problem of calling only on certain children. It was social studies time. The students were reading a historical novel. Trade books, oh my, a progressive solution to reading and teaching social studies, I thought, "What was she complaining about in July?"

But the noise in the room was deafening. Students were talking to each other about anything and everything they could. I noticed several children reading magazines and others weaving plastic lanyard strips to make a chain. To make matters worse, the voices of the competing inclusion teachers drowned out whatever Esther was saying. Esther was prattling on

as if everything was normal. As students were called on responses like "huh" or "what did you say" were common. No one in the room was paying attention to anything anyone else was doing, not teachers, not students. I sat there wondering what I could do to influence this teacher and help her students.

The period ended. The special-education teacher took the students on their bathroom break, and Esther and I spoke about our plans for the following week. She would do a unit on the Age of Exploration. We decided that I would team-teach with her as we introduced a long-term inquiry project on explorers. When it was time for me to leave, Esther asked, "What can I do to make my room more student-centered?" Given the setting, I was, frankly, unprepared for such a question. I quickly, almost glibly responded, "You might try grouping your students into tables of five students." I did not know what else to say to her. It was, I told myself, a place to begin. She thanked me and I was on my way. I held out no hope that my suggestion was useful or that it would be followed.

When I returned to Esther's room a week later I was both shocked and pleased at what I saw. (see Figure 2) First, the impregnable table separating Esther from her students had been removed to the back of the room, where it now stood as a "preparation" table for students to work on an art portion of a project. Students were sitting in six groups of five students each. Esther's desk still guarded the bookshelves, but to my mind, progress had been made.

We has spoken briefly about doing a unit on explorers the week before, and we had agreed that this would be as good a time as any to start the unit. That morning I suggested that we approach the unit over a six week period based on the KWILT strategy. KWILT is an extension of K-W-L (Ogle, 1986), extending the strategy beyond a content area reading to a scaffold for long term inquiry. KWILT extends by adding the "I" and the "T" to the now commonly used what do I Know, what more do I Want to know, and what have I Learned content reading strategy. The "I" asks how I Intend to learn while the "T" asks how will I Teach what I have learned to someone else. KWILT then becomes an inquiry strategy sustainable over the length of a project.

Our first step was to determine what Esther's students knew about explorers. As agreed, I led the discussion while Esther acted as scribe. Students knew a great deal about explorers. They knew that explorers went into space, that they searched the depths of the oceans, and that they sometimes looked for gold and gems. They knew that explorers were brave and that they were probably smart. One student even knew that Columbus discovered Ohio! Esther was visibly pleased with what her students had accomplished that day, yet she wondered aloud about the kind of knowledge her students had that was not related to the curriculum she felt obligated to cover. She had additional concerns. Was it appropriate to narrow the time frame for her students so they could concentrate on the Age of Exploration? Would her students be sophisticated enough to ask productive inquiry questions? What kind of coaching did she need to do to help her students achieve?

In my role as consultant, I assured her that it was appropriate to create a curriculum box for her students to explore. She had a clear responsibility to build the box as broad or as narrow as she needed in order to invite her students in to the process and to insure their successful inquiry. Her job as a coach in the classroom was to guide, push, and suggest in order for her students to reach for knowledge within the curriculum box. We would soon find out if her students were sophisticated enough to ask productive questions, although I never doubted that they were.

The explorer project became a weekly exercise in modeling successful strategies for Esther and our reflecting on their success in the classroom. Because she was unwilling to give up her conception of a teacherly role completely, Esther covered the rest of her curriculum in a traditional manner, but when I came to her classroom we became constructivists together. The second week of the explorer project came. I modeled the process of finding out what students wanted to learn for Esther's benefit. Students asked questions like "Did explorers have partners?" and "What did explorers need to take with them on their journey?" and "How did explorers navigate across open ocean?" Each of the six groups was then instructed to choose one of the questions, either one of their own or one from another group, to research and answer.

They would prepare a report, both written and visual, to present to the school community, and do a presentation at the end. At the end of this class period, Esther spoke to me about how really complex the questions were. She also said that the textbook didn't ask these kinds of questions. She also commented favorably on the interest in this project expressed by her students.

Over the next several weeks, students were busy working at the school library, connected to the Internet, and looking at classroom resources as they explored their topics. Esther even decided to allow students to work on their projects when I was not there, so long as all their other work was complete. In the end, all of her students performed well, exceeding Esther's expectations. Two groups stand out as worthy of specific mention: the group interested in navigation and the group interested in supplies.

The navigation group consisted of five bilingual students. They became fascinated with the navigation tools that explorers used to help them get them from one place to another over open water. As they investigated their topic they came across an instrument called an astrolabe, a navigational device useful in determining latitude, probably used by Columbus and other explorers of his time. "How did this instrument work?" they wondered. After some research consisting of both reading and looking at pictures of astrolabes, they decided that it was a lot like a protractor, allowing them to measure angles of the sun at specific times of the day. They took the large wooden protractor from the chalk well, tied a weighted piece of yarn to the center knob and sighted the flat side at the sun at noon. The string fell across a number representing an angle, which they reasoned, must be the latitude. According to their calculations they found Urbanville about 47° north latitude. They were not far off. The actual latitude is 42° north. Esther and I were impressed with the creative solution constructed by this group. They also created an instructional video on how to use their modern astrolabe constructed from the demonstration protractor.

The supply group decided that they needed to know how much water explorers had to carry with them on a long sea voyage. One of the members of the group was from the West Coast of Mexico and knew that salt water was unfit to drink. The group knew that human beings

could not survive without water for any length of time. This group inferred that ships would have to carry large quantities of water with them in order to survive long sea voyages. They determined that each sailor needed a minimum amount of water daily. They learned that a barrel of water was 32 gallons and the crew would be around 30 men. They calculated the requirements from there. It turned out that a voyage required 132 barrels of water from start to finish. Acting in support of this group, I decided to do some basic research in a local library that housed a large collection of original documents relating to American history. During the course of my research, I discovered a bill of lading from a ship in the early 18th century showing that a ship carried 124 barrels of water for a crew of 30 sailors. It also carried 100 barrels of beer, a fact the group did not account for.

The project was a complete success. Esther remarked, "It's amazing how smart kids get when you teach 'em this way." But, she wondered if six groups of five were not too hard to manage. She described managing the constructivist classroom as "walking a tightrope while spinning plates in the air." She asked me if five groups of six would be appropriate. After my cautioning her that the groups may be too large for productive work, and her countering with there is one fewer group to manage, she decided to make the change.

As the students were assigned new partners and told where to move their desks, Esther went to her desk and moved it to the back of the room, relinquishing her tight claim on the bookshelves. (See Figure 3) The room took on a whole new flavor. It felt more open and focused on students. I asked Esther why she moved her desk to the back of the room. "I don't know," she replied, "I guess it just feels better there." Esther was moving toward opening her classroom, moving from less to more along the continuum of student-centered teaching. Esther was not yet able to articulate the reasons for this change. The experience, I speculate, was simply too new for her to have integrated it into her personal knowledge (Polanyi, 1958).

During the new project, students read Johnny Tremain while studying the American Revolutionary period. They were engaged in group projects incorporating reader's theatre, writing dramatic scenes from the book, and presenting them as drama to the class. Constructivist

principles were being applied in Esther's classroom with or without my being there. And then it happened.

In late December, about a week before Christmas break, Dr. Worran, East School's Principal, called a faculty meeting. I was invited to attend. The mood of the faculty was upbeat, filled with the spirit of the holiday season. "Don't teach anything that isn't on the Iowa test," Dr. Worran scolded. I could feel a depressing chill fill the room. Dr. Worran spoke about probation, testing success, and job security. He spoke as if everything was outside of his control, blaming the Board of Education for "messing things up." But he was rigid in his desire to stay off probation. That meant that success on the Iowa Test was a significant personal goal that he transferred to his teachers as a school wide goal.

When I returned to East School after the holiday break, Esther's room had a whole new look. (see Figure 4) Students were no longer sitting at tables, grouped to engage in inquiry. Now they sat in isolated cells, a cross-hatch of rows and aisles that kept each student separate from every other student in the room. The room was no longer a lively, engaging place. Esther had returned to her card calling system, initiating every conversation. When I called her on the change she reminded me that, "You were there when Dr. Worran told us to teach to the test. That's what I am doing, teaching to the test. This constructivist stuff is nice, but we have real work to do now!"

Discussion

The notion that "real work" is somehow different from authentic and engaging discovery is troublesome. Metz (1989) speaks of the script for "real school" being generic in spite of vast socioeconomic differences found in society. Real school assumes that all children are the same, that school is democratic, providing everyone with an equal opportunity for learning, when nothing could be further from reality. Street (1995) talks about the use of literacy as a cudgel by the middle class to either relieve themselves of the burden of guilt or by consciously applying middle-class standards to everyone, then pointing to failure as not working hard enough.

Heath (1983) has provided us with a look at alternate literacies that do not blend well

with the middle class literacies of the schoolroom. She also provides us with the tools for coming to know our students so we can better reach them. Heath's work flies in the face of the one size fits all educational policies of those that advocate high-stakes testing as the sole measure for performance.

But, perhaps most disturbing of all is what we can learn from Esther, a teacher who was excited about what her children were doing when she was able to take some risks with them, but when faced with the pressure of high-stakes testing, she reverted to a traditional teaching style. Esther had stopped blaming her kids for not learning. She had no longer blamed parents and the community. She was witnessing the power of discovery. While she continued to have a number of concerns about the management of a student-centered classroom, often feeling out of control, she was willing to battle that feeling in order to witness her children learning. Yet, when faced with the pressure of high-stakes assessment, she folded, turning away from discovery and inquiry that genuinely engaged her students toward a more teacher-directed classroom where students are isolated from one another. Listen for a moment to her words, written in a journal she shared with me:

> I suppose the ideal is to let go and take off and throw yourself into this new philosophy. But still, underneath it all, I am ultimately responsible for scores and grades. I'm sorry, I can't buy the "WHOLE" bag. (I can buy a lot of it and a lot of them are really growing!) But they are still too new and fragile to the ideas to dump the whole responsibility of being prepared for a test on them. Many of them have no support at home. If I don't drill and test and quiz and ask, they just won't do it.

I find Esther's commentary sad. What she failed to grasp is that the shift of responsibility to the student for learning is not an excuse to stop asking and quizzing; it is just done in context and not in concert. But, more troubling, notice how Esther returns to blaming parents for their failure to provide and support their children. Notice too, that Esther sets herself up as the savior of her children. The Esther I met over the previous summer had returned with a vengeance. Enough of this experimentation, we have "real work" to do now.

Perhaps there is a grain of truth to the notion of so much reform with so little change (Cuban, 1993). Learning to be a constructivist, student-centered teacher is hard enough when it is encouraged, but when the district forces high-stakes assessment into the mix, it may be impossible to change at all, at least not without peer support (Passman, 1999). Constructivist classrooms require trust coupled with risk. It is difficult to take a risk with learning when the high-stakes territory is defined so rigidly. It is impossible to trust our students when we point fingers at them and their parents for social failures out of their control. Constructivist teaching requires us to see our students as different, capable learners. Because each student is different we must treat them differently. The high-stakes assessment based on standardized scores assumes that everyone must be exactly like me in order to be successful. We are moving toward an era of everyone looking exactly like me, where the "me" consists of those who define the standards. Esther is an example of the results of the pressure of high-stakes testing and the consequences attached to that assessment. I am saddened by the entire business.

Notes

[1] All names used are pseudonyms

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Esther's Room

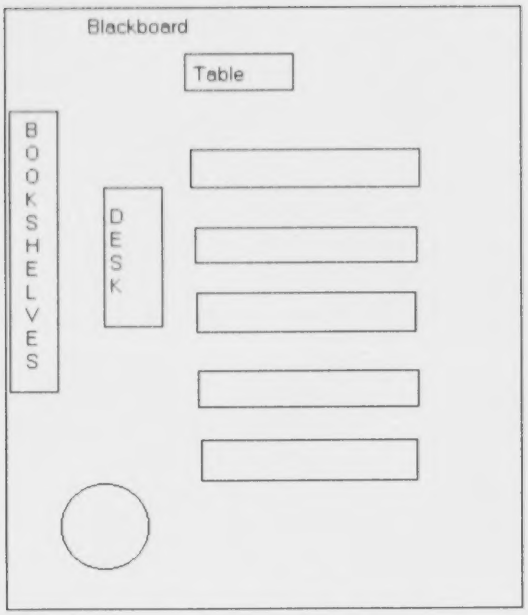

Fig. 1

Esther's Room

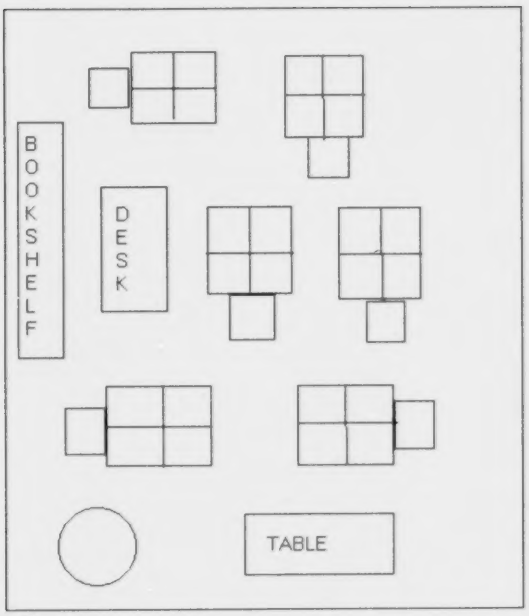

Fig. 2

Esther's Room

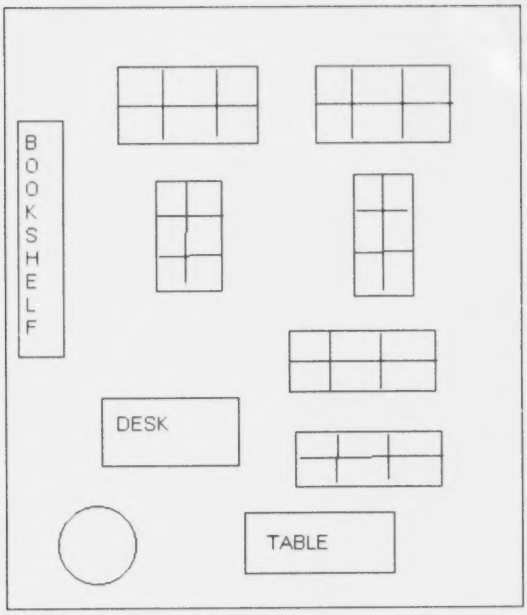

Fig. 3

Esther's Room

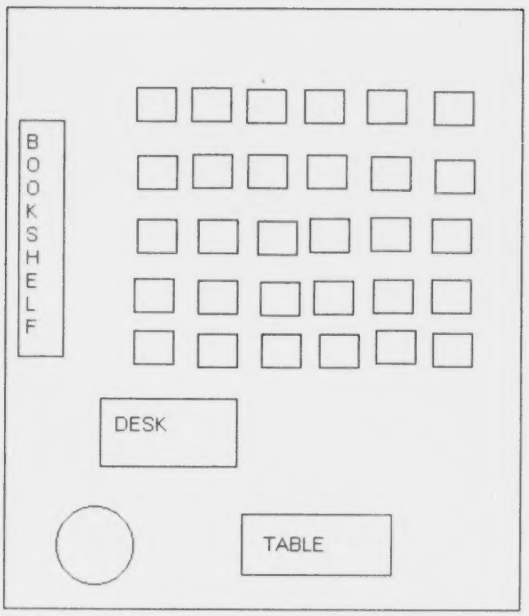

Fig. 4